I am an applied political philosopher. I try to teach students that there are better and worse arguments for the theoretical positions and assumptions that inevitably underpin policy decisions. I also try to get them to ‘thread the needle’ between aspiring to ‘ideal theory’ (which can be utopian as to be status quo-ist) and acknowledging ‘non-ideal’ practical realities (which can often breed cynicism or an abdication of theory and endorsement of relativism).

One of my favorite assignments in this vein is in my Human Rights and International Law sophomore seminar. We begin the course by reviewing some widespread yet mistaken assumptions that people may have about human rights if they have not studied them in an academic setting (e.g. that they are ‘timeless’, that they are equivalent to ‘moral rights’, etc.). We then review competing theoretical understandings of what human rights amount to. Lastly, we look at case studies that emphasize how the same human right might be institutionally secured in radically different ways between societies for a variety of reasons. This sets students up for a final assignment in which they research the human rights criticisms that have been levied against the country where they anticipate studying abroad (or against the USA if they aren’t going abroad). They then write about a particular criticism and anticipatorily imagine how they might feel about such a criticism—both from their own perspective and also from the perspective of those hosting them.

—Max Cherem Philosophy